

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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U.S. Welcomes Overall Democratic Progress in Western Hemisphere

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer

Washington — Much of the Western Hemisphere has experienced positive political change and achieved greater freedoms over the past 10 years that have led to greater opportunities in the region, but a senior State Department official says the United States still needs to continue its support for democratization and civil society groups in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson told the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Obama administration is working to make “irreversible democratic gains in our hemisphere” by partnering with governments and organizations.

Testifying June 30, Jacobson said the past decade has seen important successes in Latin America and the Caribbean that have shown that allowing greater freedoms will bring more prosperity.

“Rising levels of political and personal freedom, greater economic prosperity and increasing global integration ... work together to generate vast opportunity,” Jacobson said. “They strengthen institutions. They have helped lift scores of millions of people out of poverty in the last decade and in the process brought forth huge pools of talent that are transforming very diverse countries.”

Jacobson said the United States is working to address the needs of vulnerable and traditionally marginalized groups in the region, such as women, indigenous people, people of African descent, young people and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons.

“We view the defense of these human and civil rights as key to the advancement of the region as a whole,” she said.

The Obama administration also remains committed to the Merida Initiative, the Central America Regional Security Initiative, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative and the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative, she said.

The U.S. programs in all four citizen-security initiatives “focus particularly on reinforcing the rule of law and strengthening democratic institutions to bring security and protection to all citizens,” she said.

Jacobson said that despite the region’s overall progress, “democratic space is being rolled back rather than expanded” in some countries.

“Persistent government pressure on freedom of expression through criminalization of dissent, a centralizing and controlling executive branch and disrespect for the legitimate and essential role of political minorities are our principal concerns in this regard,” she said.

In some countries, she said, democratic gains are threatened by persistent inequality or the insecurity caused by gangs and cartels.

Jacobson said Cuba “remains a glaring exception to the region’s democratic convergence,” while Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez “continues to disrespect the legitimate role of democratic institutions, restrict freedoms, including by closing press outlets, and use the judiciary to persecute political opponents.”

She also criticized the Nicaraguan government for manipulating its judiciary and legislature to concentrate more power in its executive branch, and warned that the “window is rapidly closing” for the international community to enhance prospects that the November 6 presidential and parliamentary vote will be free and fair.

The United States is being active in response to “democratically elected leaders who seek to consolidate power in the executive branch through extraconstitutional means,” she said, even though it is “not always easy to work positively with civil society when governments seek to limit our presence.”

“Because we respect the rights of people in all societies to choose their futures, we stand steadfast in our commitment to universal rights and democratic freedom,” Jacobson said.

Secretary Clinton Attends Inauguration of the Lantos Institute in Budapest

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton celebrated the opening of the Lantos Institute in Budapest, Hungary, saying it was set up to “advance democracy, inclusion, tolerance and bipartisan cooperation” around the world.

The human rights institute is named after Hungarian-born Holocaust survivor and U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos, who died in 2008. Lantos, a senior member of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, was a lifelong advocate for human rights wherever they were challenged.

“Tom fought for refuseniks in the Soviet Union, for Tibetans to practice their religion, for Christians in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, for Muslims in China, for ethnic

minorities in the Balkans and for people living with HIV/AIDS around the world. No person was written off by Tom Lantos. He thought he had an obligation to reach out and embrace them all," Clinton said in remarks at the institute's inauguration June 30.

The U.S. Senate passed a resolution June 29 by unanimous consent to commemorate the institute's opening. Lantos founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in 1983, which Clinton called an "invaluable bipartisan enterprise" that brought human rights issues to people's attention in a new way.

Clinton said the timing of the institute's opening is opportune, as "democracy is struggling to be born around the world today." She said that as citizens across the Middle East and North Africa demand new rights, the people of Central and Eastern Europe can share stories of their own struggles and triumphs.

"As we struggle to help new democracies emerge, we can't let any democracy anywhere backslide," Clinton said. "The stakes are too high."

She called on democracies around the world to continue building and strengthening their institutions, as trust between people and their governments is "the glue which holds democracies together."

Clinton urged people to work across all sectors of society to support democracy, civil society and the rule of law while protecting the rights of minorities.

While in Budapest for the institute's opening, Clinton met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The two discussed cooperation in Afghanistan, trade relations and Hungary's efforts to strengthen its economy. Hungary has provided approximately 500 military personnel to operations in Afghanistan.

Clinton said they also spoke about preserving Hungary's democratic institutions and providing checks and balances among branches of government, which are an essential component of democratic governance. She called for the country to commit to an independent judiciary, a free press and governmental transparency.

The secretary's stop in Budapest comes ahead of her participation in the Community of Democracies sixth ministerial meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania, June 30-July 1, and a brief visit to Madrid.

"The meeting will bring together different actors in democracy, including senior government leaders, civil society representatives, women, parliamentarians, youth and the private sector, around the shared goals of advancing civil society and supporting emerging

democracies," said Tomicah Tillemann, Clinton's senior adviser for civil society and emerging democracies. Tillemann, who is Lantos' grandson, spoke from the State Department during a June 24 briefing on the secretary's trip.

In Madrid July 1-2, Clinton will underscore the close partnership and friendship the United States and Spain enjoy, based on shared values and common interests, the State Department said in a separate statement. "The secretary will meet with Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Foreign Minister Trinidad Jiménez to discuss a range of issues including Afghanistan, North Africa, and the Middle East, and trade, investment and the economy," the statement said.

United States Boosts Climate Programs in Pacific Nations

By Karin Rives | Staff Writer

Washington — In 2005, an entire village in the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu had to be relocated because of rising sea levels. Fourteen homes and a church in the small community of Lateu, some 100 people in all, were moved to higher ground, an event that became known as the first time climate change displaced an entire town.

Since then, the low-lying island nations of the Pacific have moved to the forefront of media stories as global awareness of the mounting climate crisis grows. Experts say that entire countries are now at risk of being swallowed by the sea as polar caps melt and oceans rise.

Climate change is high on the agenda as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and other U.S. officials travel through the Pacific islands region. Speaking to reporters in Papua New Guinea June 30, Campbell said that there is broad recognition among world leaders today that Pacific nations need international assistance to cope with climate change — and urgently so.

"We all acknowledge that the challenge facing the Pacific islands in this regard is profound," Campbell told Radio Australia. "There is a clear recognition that some of these societies and island nations who have contributed nothing to the problem bear the tragic burden of the consequences."

NEW USAID OFFICE COMING TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Recognition of the climate challenge faced by the region is a reason the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is opening a new office in Papua New Guinea's capital, Port Moresby. The office will expand programs focused on climate-related challenges to food security,

said USAID Assistant Administrator Nisha Biswal, who is travelling with Campbell and the U.S. Department of Defense's Admiral Patrick Walsh.

"Previously, we had managed our programs from Bangkok and Manila, but we find that the distances are too large to enable us to engage directly with the people and the governments," Biswal said. "We will therefore, in the very near future — in the next few months — be opening our regional office here in Port Moresby."

Among the new programs on USAID's to-do list is a \$4 million initiative in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu to make agricultural production more resilient to warmer weather, salt intrusion, new weather conditions and other climate-related changes. Under another \$2 million program, USAID will work with Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa and Tuvalu to train local residents to adapt to climate change.

PUSH FOR ENERGY-EFFICIENT BUILDINGS, RENEWABLE POWER

Traveling in the Pacific since June 27, Campbell said he has been concerned by the foreign-funded large buildings going up on many islands.

Many of the new buildings waste energy at a time when conservation should be a key priority for developers, according to experts among the U.S. delegation. In addition, the delegation was struck by the islands' dependency on petroleum, despite the region's very high oil prices.

Encouraging renewable energy and green technology will be a focus for the United States at the Pacific Island Forum, to be held in Auckland, New Zealand, in early September, Campbell said.

"We think we can potentially cooperate more with Australia and New Zealand — and particularly with China — to invest more in clean technologies going forward," he said.

Patriotic Place Names Sometimes Display Patriotic Spirit

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer

Washington — The Fourth of July holiday is coming up, and Americans all across the United States will be celebrating with all manner of patriotic events to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence by the nation's Founding Fathers on July 4, 1776.

But expressions of patriotism don't end with the day. Many cities and towns across the United States have

chosen patriotic-sounding names, but not always for patriotic reasons.

For example, thirty-five places in the United States have "eagle" in their names, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The U.S. Congress chose the bald eagle as the national emblem in 1789. This majestic bird was — and still is — seen as a symbol of strength, courage and freedom, and, unlike other eagles, the bald eagle is indigenous only to North America.

The most populous U.S. city (26,248) with eagle in its name is Eagle Pass, Texas. But according to the Texas State Historical Association website, the city did not get its name from the American bald eagle in particular. Located near the Mexican border near an old smuggler's trail, the area was known as El Paso del Águila because of frequent flights of Mexican eagles from a nearby wooded grove. The city that grew up there, however, kept the English version of the name: Eagle Pass.

Thirty-one places have "liberty" in their names — the most populous being Liberty, Missouri, with 29,149 residents. Founded in 1822, the city of Liberty says it is "named for the principle that Americans hold most dear." Liberty, the city's website says, "today offers a freedom of choice for contemporary living rivaling that of any community in the country."

Independence, Missouri, with 116,830 residents, is the largest of 11 places around the United States with "independence" for a name. Once called "Big Spring" by the American Indians who originally lived there, the U.S. government took control of the area in 1825 through treaties with the Indians. Missouri's General Assembly approved the site as Independence in 1827, according to the city's website. The city gained its name from the white settlers who admired President Andrew Jackson, who was known as a "people's president" and for advancing political democracy.

Of the nine places having "freedom" in their names, the largest is New Freedom, Pennsylvania, with 4,464 citizens. But New Freedom — incorporated in 1873 — isn't named for the blessing of freedom, but for the Free family (see York Town Square blog post), a prominent clan that lived there. Since there was another town already with the name Freedom, "New Freedom" was chosen as the official name, according to the borough's website.

Patriot, Indiana, with a population of 209 is the only place in the United States with "patriot" in its name. Originally called Troy when it was first laid out in 1820, the town later changed its name to Patriot because of the patriotic sacrifices of its citizens, who answered the call of service to fight in every U.S. war beginning with the American

Revolution. A historical description (PDF, 125KB) of the town appears on the city's website. Written in 1931, it says: "Ever since [the town's founding] have the citizens, in times of stress and war, sent forth, with all the name implies, their patriotic sons, their moral aid, and more financial help than could naturally have been expected from them."

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